

ELAND

Full Tilt

Ireland to India with a Bicycle

DERVLA MURPHY



Ireland to India with a Bicyc

‘She avoided wolves (animal and human), floods, robbery, had three ribs broken in a brawl in a Afghan bus; waded across an ice torrent, hugging a cow ... suffered extremes of heat and cold, and everything, liked almost everybody.’

Homes and Garden

‘This vivid journal ... would have delighted Cervantes with its almost incredible surprises: a valley full of birds the size of butterflies and butterflies as big as robins; a village where the cattle eat apricots and the villagers eat clover ... Somewhere between Kabul and Jalalabad, she thought she was dreaming when she awoke from a roadside nap to find that nomads had raised a tent over her to shield her from the sun.’

The New York

‘I don’t know when I’ve enjoyed the account of a journey more. A great part of the enchantment of her book is that it is so good humoured and so funny. I laughed ... and learned a good deal ... one follows her with pleasure ... a brave, intelligent, rare and amusing human being.’

Margaret Lar

‘A journey fraught with incalculable hardships and perils. It is unexpected, but then everything Derv Murphy does is unexpected ... an enchantment that holds the reader as engrossed as would an exciting thriller.’

Irish Independe

‘Warmly described, and with a lack of self-regard that immediately endears her to the reader.’

Sunday Tim

‘Punctures, broken ribs, hornets and scorpions notwithstanding, it was a high old time between Mi Murphy and her Islamic hosts ... her book is sensible, warm-hearted, unfinicky.’

The Observ

Full Title

Ireland to India with a Bicycle

DERVLA MURPHY

ELAND

London

*To the peoples of
Afghanistan and Pakistan,
with gratitude for their hospitality,
with admiration for their principles
and with affection for those who befriended me*

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Foreword

On my tenth birthday a bicycle and an atlas coincided as presents and a few days later I decided to cycle to India. I've never forgotten the exact spot on a hill near my home at Lismore, County Waterford, where the decision was made and it seemed to me then, as it still seems to me now, a logical decision, based on the discoveries that cycling was a most satisfactory method of transport and that (excluding the USSR for political reasons) the way to India offered fewer watery obstacles than any other destination at a similar distance.

However, I was a cunning child so I kept my ambition to myself, thus avoiding the tolerable amusement it would have provoked among my elders. I did not want to be soothingly assured that this was a passing whim because I was quite confident that one day I *would* cycle to India.

That was at the beginning of December 1941, and on 14 January 1963, I started to cycle from Dunkirk towards Delhi.

The preparations had been simple; one of the advantages of cycling is that it automatically prevents a journey from becoming an Expedition. I already possessed an admirable Armstrong Cadet mountain bicycle named Rozinante, but always known as 'Roz'. By a coincidence I had bought her on 14 January 1961, so our journey started on her second birthday. This was ideal; we were by then a happy team, having already covered thousands of miles together, yet she was young enough to be dependable. The only preparation Roz needed was the removal of her three-speed derailleur gear which I reckoned would be too sensitive to survive Asian roads. Apart from the normal accessories – saddle-bag, bell, lamp and pump – she carried only pannier-bag holders on either side of the back wheel. Unloaded she weighs thirty-seven pounds and at the start of the journey she was taking twenty-eight pounds of kit while I carried another six pounds in a small knapsack. (A list of kit is given on page 231.) Before leaving Ireland, four spare tyres had been posted ahead to various British Embassies, Consulates and High Commissions en route; Roz takes 27½" x 1¼" tyres, which are not a standard measurement abroad.

In London, at the end of November 1962, I obtained without difficulty visas for Yugoslavia and Bulgaria; I planned to get my visas for Persia in Istanbul and for Afghanistan in Teheran. During the same visit to London I endured vaccinations and inoculations for smallpox, cholera, typhoid and yellow-fever – the latter in case I decided to return from India via Africa.

Most of the following month was spent bending over maps bought through the AA in Dublin, working out the distances between towns which had intoxicatingly improbable names. I calculated that it was 4,445 miles from Dunkirk to Peshawar, and by New Year's Eve I could have told you without hesitation where I planned to be on any given date between 14 January and 14 May, when I hoped to arrive in Peshawar. The object of this exercise was to ensure that my mail – sent care of the British Council offices en route – would not miss me; nor did it, despite many inevitable changes in my original plans.

In the intervals between mapping I took myself off to remote areas in the mountains around Lismore and practised firing and reloading my .25, the purchase of which had recently been achieved with the full and rather awe-struck co-operation of the local police. My friends regarded this purchase as so much adolescent melodrama on my part but fortunately I ignored their criticisms and stuck my gun, though its presence in the right-hand pocket of my slacks – where I habitually carried it

accustom myself to the presence of a loaded weapon – frightened me considerably more than it did anyone else. Yet within a month of leaving home the seemingly childish game of whipping it out of my pocket and flicking up the safety catch was fully justified.

I arrived in Delhi on 18 July 1963, almost six months after leaving Ireland. People with mathematical brains are always anxious to know exactly how many miles I had cycled by then and what my daily average was. Unfortunately gadgets for measuring mileage do not function on Asian roads, so I can only estimate vaguely that Roz and I covered about three thousand miles, including our detours to Murree and Gilgit. From this the mathematically inclined can easily calculate our average daily mileage, but their findings would be slightly misleading, because there were so many days when we did not cover even a mile together. Our shortest run was, I think, nineteen miles, and our longest 118 miles, but I reckon that our average on a normal cycling day was between seventy and eighty miles.

This is perhaps the moment to contradict the popular fallacy that a solitary woman who undertakes this sort of journey must be ‘very courageous’. Epictetus put it in a nutshell when he said, ‘For it is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of death and hardship.’ And because in general the possibility of physical danger does not frighten me, courage is not required; when a man tries to rob or assault me or when I find myself, as darkness is falling, utterly exhausted and waist-deep in snow halfway up a mountain pass, then I *am* afraid – but in such circumstances it is the instinct of self-preservation, rather than courage, that takes over.

For the first two months of the trip I struggled hard to keep my four closest friends informed of my progress through letters but the effort was too much; so from Teheran onwards I adopted the diary-keeping method used by most travellers and sent instalments home whenever a reliable-looking post office appeared en route. My friends circulated these instalments amongst themselves, the last on the circuit line storing the manuscript away for future reference. This book is the ‘Future Reference’.

Apart from burnishing the spelling and syntax, which are apt to suffer when one makes nightly entries whether half asleep or not, I have left the diary virtually unchanged. A few very personal and very topical comments or allusions have been excised, but the temptation to make myself sound more learned than I am, by gleaning facts and figures from an encyclopaedia and inserting them in appropriate places, has been resisted. For this reason the narrative which follows will be seen to suffer from statistic-deficiency; it only contains such information as any traveller might happen to pick up from day to day along my route.

After arriving in Delhi I worked for six months with the Tibetan refugees in northern India and then enjoyed a few more treks with Roz in the Himalayas and in south-west Nepal, before submitting to the degradation of flying home on 23 February 1964, with a dismantled Roz by my side as ‘personal effects’.

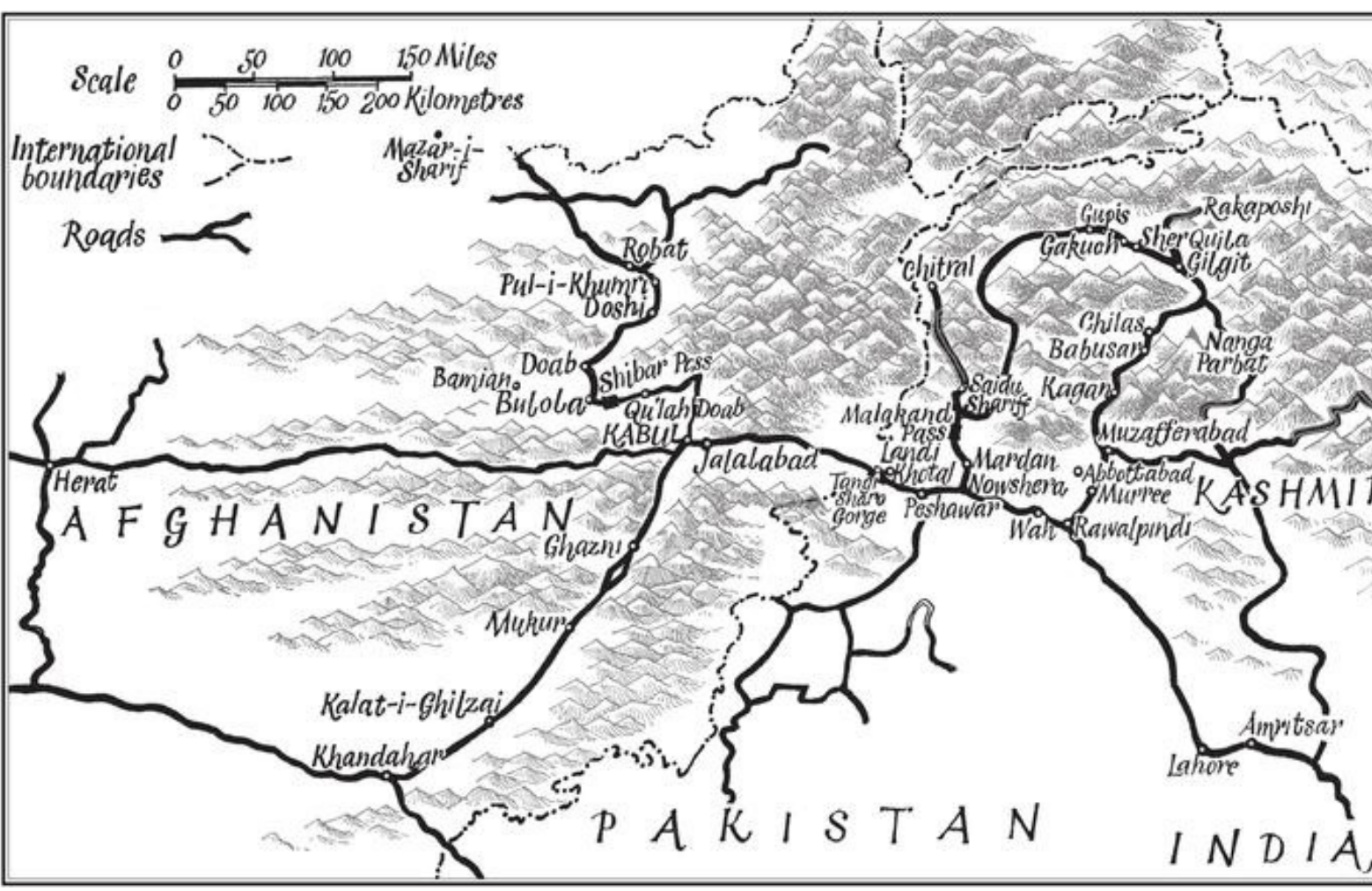
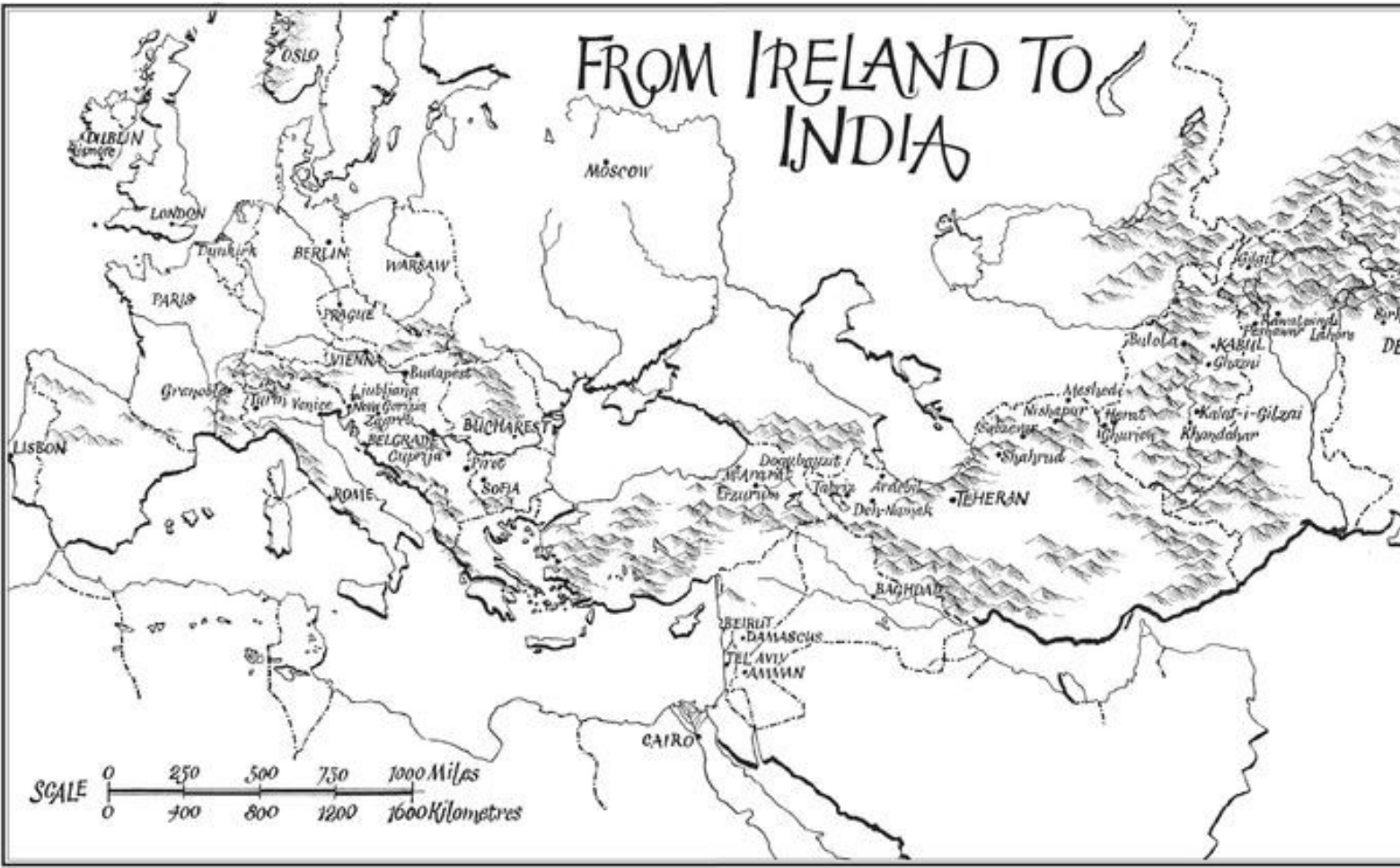
My thanks go in many directions: to the British and American consular officials in those countries where Ireland is not diplomatically represented, who adopted and cared for me as though I were their own; to the scores of individuals and families in every country on my route whose boundless hospitality taught me that for all the horrible chaos of the contemporary political scene this world is full of kindness; to the chance friends I made in odd places, whose names I never knew or have forgotten but whose companionship made a sometimes lonely journey much more pleasant; and last but certainly not least, to Daphne Pearce, who suggested the title and gave invaluable help in editing the manuscript; to Patricia Truell, who compiled the index and guided me through the ordeal of correcting my first proofs; and to my other friends in Ireland, who loyally and patiently read over 200,000 words in an execrable hand and whose interest in my experiences was both the inspiration and

the reward of keeping this diary.

~~For my part I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move, to feel the needs and hitches of our life more nearly, to come down off the feather-bed of civilization and find the globe granite underfoot and strewn with cutting flints.~~

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

FROM IRELAND TO INDIA



Introduction to the Journey

DUNKIRK TO TEHERAN

I had planned a route to India through France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Persia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Departure Day was to have been 7 January 1963, but by then the freak weather of the year had reached even Ireland and I postponed 'D-Day' for a week, innocently supposing that the conditions 'could not go on'. But of course they did go on, and in my impatience to be off I decided that to postpone departure from week to week would not be practical – though in retrospect I realise that it would have been a lot more practical than heading for Central Europe during the coldest winter in eighty years.

I shall never forget that dark ice-bound morning when I began to cycle east from Dunkirk; to have the fulfilment of a twenty-one-year-old ambition apparently within one's grasp can be quite disconcerting. This was a moment I had thought about so often that when I actually found myself living through it I felt as though some favourite scene from a novel had come, incredibly, to life. However, within a few weeks my journey had degenerated from a happy-go-lucky cycle trek to a grim struggle for progress by *any* means along roads long lost beneath snow and ice.

At first my disappointment was acute, but I had set out to enjoy myself by seeing the world, not to make or break any record, so I soon became adjusted to these conditions, which led to quite a few interesting adventures. Also, I was aware of 'seeing the world' in circumstances unique to my generation. Should I survive to the end of this century it will be impressive to recall that I crossed the breadth of Europe in the winter of 1963, when every humdrum detail of daily life was made tense and dramatic by the weather and going shopping became a scaled-down Expedition to the Antarctic. It was neat hell at the time – I cycled up to the Rouen Youth Hostel with a quarter-inch icicle firmly attached to my nose and more than once the agony of frozen fingers made me weep rather uncharacteristically – yet it seemed a reasonably good exchange for the satisfaction of cycling all the way to India.

I give full marks to Italy for the superb efficiency with which her main northern roads were kept clear during that January. Having been compelled to take a train from Grenoble to Turin, across the Alps, I found myself able to cycle, and enjoy it, almost all the way to Nova Gorizia, through a desert and impeccably beautiful Venice.

At this bisected frontier town of Nova Gorizia the formalities for being admitted into Yugoslavia seemed diabolically complicated. Repeatedly I was shuttled back and forth through the darkness from Police to Customs Officers; then, while innumerable forms were being completed in triplicate, I stood shivering outside warm offices, trying to explain why I was so improbably entering Yugoslavia with a bicycle on 28 January. And every time I took off a glove to sign yet another document the bitter wind seared my hand like caustic acid.

Suddenly a policeman shouted to someone in another room and a tall, rugged-featured woman wearing Customs Officer's uniform, appeared beside me. I stared at her in horror, only then remembering that my automatic lay in the right-hand pocket of my slacks, where the most casual search would at once detect a sinister hard object. In the stress and strain of searching Gorizia for the open frontier post (there were four in all, but three were closed to tourists) I had quite forgotten my

ingenious scheme for concealing the weapon. So now I foresaw myself being hurled into the nearest dungeon, from which I would eventually emerge, emaciated and broken in spirit, after years of negotiations between two governments who are not, diplomatically, on speaking terms. But alarm was unnecessary. The formidable female took one quick look at my intricately laden bicycle, my knapsack with its protruding loaf of bread and my scruffy self. Then she burst into good-humoured laughter – which one would not have believed her capable – slapped me on the back and waved me towards the frontier. It was 6.15 p.m. when I passed under the railway bridge with ‘Jugoslavija’ painted across it in huge letters.

Two miles from the frontier, having cycled along an unlighted road that leads away from Italy and then curves back, I came to Nova Gorica, the Yugoslav half of the town. Here, beneath the weak glow of a street lamp, a solitary figure was walking ahead of me. Overtaking it I saw a good-looking girl who, in reply to my questions, said, ‘Yes’ she spoke German, but ‘No’ there wasn’t a cheap inn available, only the Tourist Hotel, which was very expensive. Even in the dim light my look of dismay must have been apparent, because she immediately added an invitation to come home with her for the night. As this was within my first hour of entering Slovenia I was astonished; but soon I learnt that such kindness is common form in that region.

While we walked between high blocks of workers’ flats, Romana told me that she shared a room with two other typists employed in a local factory at £3 per week, but as one was away in hospital there would be plenty of space for me.

The little room, at the top of three flights of stairs, was clean and adequately furnished, though the only means of cooking was an electric ring, and the bathroom and lavatory were shared with three families living, in one room each, on the same floor. Arita, Romana’s room-mate, gave me a most enthusiastic welcome and we settled down to a meal of very curious soup, concocted out of some anaemic meat broth, in which lightly whipped eggs were cooked, followed by my bread and cheese (imported from Italy) and coffee (imported from Ireland).

I found these youngsters delightful company – vivacious, perfectly mannered and intelligent. They were simply dressed and it was pleasant to see their clear-skinned faces, innocent of any make-up, and their well-groomed heads of unpermed sanely-cut hair. I noted too the impressive row of books in the little shelf by the stove – among them translations of *Dubliners*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The Coiner*, *Black and Red* and *The Leopard*.

Anticipating a tough mountain ride on the following day I was relieved to find that 9.30 p.m. was bedtime, as these girls rise at 5.30 a.m. to catch the factory bus and be at work by seven o’clock.

It was a deceptively fine morning when I left Nova Gorica. The second-class but well-kept road to Ljubljana wound through a range of fissured mountains, whose lower slopes were studded with tiny villages of brown-roofed, ramshackle farmhouses, and whose upper slopes, of perpendicular bare rock, gave the valley an odd appearance, as though it had been artificially walled in from the rest of the world. Then, towards midday, as I was revelling in the still, crisp air and brilliant sunshine, a violent wind arose. Whether because of the peculiar configuration of the mountains here, or because it was one more manifestation of freakish weather, this wind blew with a force such as I had never previously encountered. Before I could adjust myself on the saddle to do battle with my new enemy it had lifted me right off Roz and deposited me on a heap of gravel by the wayside. None the worse, I remounted, but ten minutes later, despite my efforts to hold Roz on the road and myself on Roz, we were again separated, and this time I went rolling down a fifteen-foot sloping ditch, unable to get my grip on the icy bank to check my fall. I ended up on a stream which happily was frozen so solid that my impact produced not a crack in the ice. After crawling cautiously along the stream for some twenty

yards, to find a way up to the road and Roz, I decided that from now on walking was the only logical means of progress.

At the valley's end my road started to climb the mountains, sweeping up and up and again up, in a series of hairpin bends that each revealed a view more wild and splendid than the last. At one such bend I was actually frightened by the power of the gale; I couldn't walk against it, and for some four or five minutes I simply stood, bent over Roz, my body braced with all its strength in the effort to hold us both on the road.

Near the top of the pass, seven miles from the valley floor, things were further complicated by the reappearance of my old enemies – packed snow and black ice underfoot. On the west side of the mountain range there had been strangely little snow (although everything that could freeze had frozen) but now, going over the pass, I was abruptly back to the too-familiar vision of a landscape completely white, each contour and angle rounded and disguised. Then yet another blizzard started, the flakes whirling round me like a host of malicious little white demons.

By now I was exhausted from the struggle uphill against the gale and the agony of frost-bitten hands and feet. My hands were too numb for me to consult the map, which in any case would probably have been ripped away by the wind or rendered illegible by the snow. Crawling along over the ice, I told myself that this was an advantage, because if no village was marked I would probably curl up by the wayside in despair.

In fact there was a tiny village, called *Hfusevje*, less than two miles ahead, and on arriving there I thanked my guardian angel, as I blundered about among piles of snow stacked four and five feet high on either side of the road, searching for something that looked like an inn. At last I saw two old men emerging from a doorway, wiping their moustaches with the backs of their hands. This looked hopeful, so I dragged Roz over a pile of snow, propped her against the wall, and entered the two-storeyed stone house.

Obviously the primary need was brandy, yet my face was so numb that I couldn't articulate one word. I merely pointed to the relevant bottle, and stood by the stove to thaw out, while a group of card-playing men stared at me with a trace of that hostility shown by all peasants in remote places to unexpected strangers. Then an old man came rushing in to inform the company that I had arrived with a bicycle – and, as I soon recovered the power of speech, friendly relations were easily established.

I now broached the subject of accommodation for the night and the landlady at once broke into excited discussions with her customers. In the middle of this the door opened again and a young woman entered. She was hailed with great relief all round, and turning to me introduced herself as English as a local social worker. She explained that tourists are not allowed to stay in any but Tourist Hotels – which meant yet another disruption of my plans, for I had intended, on crossing the frontier from expensive Italy, to settle down in some village such as *Hfusevje* and wait there, living cheaply until weather conditions again permitted cycling.

However, *pace* Government regulations, it was obvious that this particular tourist could not now be accommodated anywhere but at the village inn. The next step was to contact the local policeman, so that he might give his blessing to the irregularity. This formality completed, I was shown up to my large room, which contained one small bed in a corner and nothing else whatever.

When I came down to eat some bread and cheese by the stove in the pub I found a young girl waiting for me – one who was to prove a true friend and who provided me with the most congenial companionship during the following days. A daughter of the local postman and postwoman, Irena was a student of psychology at Ljubljana University, and was now home for the winter vacation, that is to say, the month of January. She was due to return to Ljubljana on 31 January, and she advised me

wait at Hfusevje until then, as the road down to the plain would be impassable after such a blizzard. She added that she would smuggle me into her room at the University Students' Hostel, where one of the five beds was vacant, thus saving me the expense of the Tourist Hotel.

For the next two days my landlady mothered me so successfully that I settled down to write happily as though I were in my own home. Indeed, I was enthusiastically adopted by the whole locality; the men reported my arrival to their womenfolk who paid a special call at the inn to shake me by the hand, slap me on the back, tell me that I was welcome to Slovenia, and, as often as not, invite me to come and stay in their homes indefinitely.

On the 31st Roz and I left for Ljubljana in a snow-chained truck and that drive was one of the worst frustrations of the expedition. The road swept down for thirty miles through magnificent mountains and valleys and pine forests, all glittering in the sunshine as though covered in diamond-dust, yet here was I being ignominiously transported by truck. However, I could not complain of having no time to admire my surroundings, for the ice was so treacherous that it took us three hours to cover forty-five miles.

The university hostel, converted from an old convent, was such a vast building that there was little difficulty in smuggling me to Irena's room. Personally I was of the opinion that the Authorities, who had given me a warm welcome when I arrived in search of Irena, were perfectly well aware of the situation and quite happy about it, but my room-mates were obviously enjoying the conspiracy so I entered into the spirit of the thing with as much enthusiasm as my more advanced years allowed.

On the following morning Roz and I left Irena and her companions in Ljubljana, equipped with a bundle of introductions from them to Slovenes living all along our route, but after cycling about twenty miles we were again forced to get a lift by truck to Zagreb.

After a stay of four days in Zagreb I arrived in Belgrade, following a nightmarish journey by truck over the 250 miles of frozen plain which stretched with relentless white anonymity from Zagreb to the capital. During our thirty-nine hours on the road we saw not one other vehicle – fortunately for me the truck was carrying some vital, mysterious military load – and the only traffic was an occasional pony sleigh travelling between villages. Three times the engine broke down and once, in the middle of the night, repairs took so long that by the time we were ready to start again an impassable snowdrift had formed in front of us. But the two drivers and I agreed afterwards that this was a blessing, because by the time we had dug ourselves out with spades carried for the purpose we were almost warm.

Apart from these breakdowns we never stopped, so our average speed over the ridged surface of rock-hard snow was about eight miles per hour. I remember these two Serbs with a special affection, so gruelling were the hardships which we shared and so brave was the gaiety with which they faced them.

By now I felt that I had lost my rôle of 'traveller' and become no more than a demoralised fugitive from the weather and I retain only confused, unreal impressions of Zagreb and Belgrade.

However, on the morning of my third day in Belgrade, there came a rise in temperature that not merely eased the body but relaxed the nerves. Never shall I forget the joy of standing bareheaded in my host's front garden, watching tenuous, milky clouds drifting across the blue sky; only then did I appreciate the peculiar tension imposed by the savageness of the past weeks. Yet the thaw held its own dangers. That day thick, six-foot icicles came crashing from eaves to pavements, killing at least two pedestrians in Belgrade; the streets became uncontrollable torrents, as the ten-foot walls of dirty snow which lined them gradually dwindled.

On the following morning, with the optimism of impatience, I started to cycle towards Niš; but

had frozen again during the night and though the cold was no longer intolerable I had to admit defeat by black ice once more.

Before midday a Montenegrin driver had taken Roz and me up ten miles outside Belgrade, but at dusk we were still trying, by one road or another, to reach Niš. In despair my companion finally decided to try a *détour* via a third-class mountain road of which he knew nothing. So, as darkness gathered in the deep valleys, and spread upwards to cover the wooded mountains, we slowly ascended a twisting track, its ridged surface made all the more dangerous by the beginnings of the thaw. My companion had been driving all through the night from Zagreb, his mate having been taken ill there, so I felt the greatest sympathy for him, and I attribute our next misfortune to his extreme fatigue.

At one of the bends, before I could realise what was happening, the truck had skidded off the road and was leaning at a slight angle against a sturdy and very fortunately placed tree, which probably saved us from death at the foot of the precipice.

Having reassured each other that we had received no more than minor injuries, we got out the map which told us that a village lay about two miles away through the forest on our left. It seemed unlikely that any other traffic would appear and my companion was obviously too exhausted, and too shaken by the crash, to undertake the walk himself, so I suggested that he should write a note for me to deliver to the village policeman, explaining the situation.

It was soon after 6 p.m. when, leaving Roz on the truck, I set off along a convenient cart-track through the trees, where the snow had been packed down by sleighs collecting fire-wood. It was some fifteen minutes later when a heavy weight hurled itself at me without warning.

I stumbled, dropping the torch that I had been carrying, then recovered my balance, and found one animal hanging by its teeth from the left shoulder of my wind-cheater, another worrying at the trousers around my right ankle, and a third standing about two yards away, looking on, only its eyes visible in the starlight.

Ironically enough, I had always thought that there was something faintly comical in the idea of being devoured by wolves. It had seemed to me the sort of thing that doesn't *really* happen ... So now as I braced my body against the hanging weight, slipped off my glove, pulled my .25 out of my pocket, flicked up the safety-catch and shot the first animal through the skull, I was possessed by the curious conviction that none of this was true, while at the same time all my actions were governed by sheer panic.

At the sound of the report, and as the first animal dropped to the ground, the second one released my ankle and was about to make off when I fired at him. Meanwhile the third member of the pack (or three can be said to constitute a pack) had tactfully disappeared. Retrieving the torch, I found that one bullet had got the second animal in the ribs – a fantastic fluke shot. Both animals (some authorities think they may have been wild dogs) were males, hardly as big as the average Irish sheep-dog, with dreadfully emaciated bodies.

It was when I had left the scene that the reaction set in. Also, forgetting that there was another mile and a half between me and the village, I had lavishly, and quite unnecessarily, emptied my gun, so that every real or imaginary sound made me tremble with apprehension. Walking rapidly, I dwelt with morbid fascination on the part that luck had played in my escape, and the longer I thought about the more terrified I became, until at last the conviction that I must have gone astray prompted me to take out my compass to confirm the fact that I was still going towards the village.

When I arrived there, the policeman and his wife were having their supper of cold garlic sausage and pickled cucumbers. While the policeman was driving by sleigh to the truck his wife bathed the scalp-wound I had suffered in the crash and gave me hot rum. I slept soundly that night; only during

the following week did I start having nightmares about wolves ...

~~The next morning was overcast and very much milder so, reunited with Roz, I set off at 8 a.m. to walk the twelve miles to the low-lying main road, where the thaw might be sufficiently advanced to permit cycling.~~

There was a strange feeling in the air that day. It was warm enough for me to leave my windcheater open as I pushed Roz uphill, yet there were no visible signs of the thaw at this height. All around me the mountains, valleys and forests lay white and lifeless under a low, grey sky, in the profound stillness of a landscape where no breeze stirred, there was neither house nor bird to be seen and the streams were silent under their covering of ice. I stopped often to look around me, and savoured the uncanny sensation of being the only living, moving thing in the midst of this hushed desolation where my own breathing sounded loud.

Then, on the other side of the pass, the spell was broken. Villages appeared, huddled improbably on the steep mountain-sides, and I joined a group of friendly peasants, sitting on their sleigh behind two ambling, cream-coloured oxen. One of the men spoke German, and told me that down on the plain the flooding was already extensive.

At midday I reached the main road, but found the icy patches still too frequent for cycling, though the surface was streaming with water. So I thumbed the next truck, and was taken twenty-five miles to Svetozarevo.

Here, at last, I saw a road completely free of ice and snow. After weeks of using Roz as a hand-car for pushing luggage my exhilaration at being able to cycle again made up for my lack of training and I sped joyously towards Nîs, too pleased with myself to heed the ominous fact that in every direction flood-waters covered the flat fields.

I did not speed for long. After five or six miles the road dipped slightly, and now the floods were right across it, some twelve inches deep, so that at each revolution of the pedals my feet were alternately submerged. As it would not have helped to dismount, I cycled slowly on, passing anxiously looking groups of people in bullock- and pony-carts, watching men in little boats punting over the fields to rescue families from farmhouses which had been suddenly isolated by the rapidly rising waters.

Leaving these scenes behind me I saw that the Morava River was now flowing on my left, parallel to and level with the road. From the near distance came a dull, booming sound, as soldiers blew up the gigantic accumulations of rock-hard snow which, unless artificially loosened, would have dammed the river and sent its overflow rushing through the nearby town of Cuprija.

It was awe-inspiring to see the wide, angry Morava swiftly sweeping its tremendous burden of ice and snow-chunks through the vast wilderness of sullen, brown flood-waters, and my awe was soon justified when a massive wave came crashing across the road, swept me off Roz and rolled me over and over, choking as I swallowed the muddy water and gasping as its iciness penetrated my clothes. Next a branch of a little roadside tree appeared above me and pulling myself up by it I found that the water, though still flowing strongly, was now no more than three feet deep. I looked for Roz and during one appalling moment, thought that she had disappeared. Then I saw a yellow handlebar grip in a ditch, and hurried to rescue her. Fortunately my kit had been wrapped in waterproof coverings, to avoid the danger of melting snow seeping through the bags when we entered warm buildings at night so most of it remained undamaged.

Cuprija was less than half a mile away, but as I was semi-paralysed by my sodden clothes, had to half-carry Roz to keep the pannier-bags clear of the water, and was in constant danger of being again swept off-balance by the strength of the current, this half-mile seemed one of the longest that I have

ever travelled.

Reaching the safety of the bridge outside Cuprija I saw hundreds of people standing watching the threatening river in an atmosphere of tense excitement. My appearance proved almost too much for them in their already overwrought state and I was accorded a singularly undeserved Hero's Welcome when I should have been presented with a Dunce's Cap.

At Pirot, fifteen miles north of Bulgaria, the mutual antagonism of Yugoslavia and her southern neighbour becomes irritatingly obvious. So contemptuous are the Yugoslavs of their Communist cousins that they simply ignore Sofia's existence, thereby failing to maintain the high standard of sign-posting found throughout the rest of the country. They have also, with what can only be maliciously forethought, so efficiently neglected the road to the frontier town of Dimitrovgrad that its surface would deter any sane traveller from attempting to enter Bulgaria.

This road, part of one of the world's most important intercontinental highways, was marked first class on my map. As I stood outside Pirot, looking from the map to the unglorified goat-track ahead of me, which I had been repeatedly assured by the locals really was the road to Sofia, I felt a sense of betrayal. However illustrious it might have been in past history, or might still be in theory, it should now be described by map-makers, in realistic terms, as a tenth-class track, negotiable only by those with no respect either for their persons or their mode of conveyance. Admittedly I cycled along under very trying conditions, but in summer it would be just as bad.

All through the previous night it had been snowing – a fall of quickly melting snow, typical of the thawing period – and now the track was covered in slush, between deep broad craters brimful of yellow-brown water. At first I attempted to weave acrobatically around these miniature lakes, through the slush, but as they occupied at least seventy per cent of the surface area I soon decided to pedal on regardless, plunging and bouncing in and out of the water. It was 'cycling with a difference', as one never knew just how deep the next crater would be, and there was always the stimulating possibility that it would be deep enough to unseat one ...

Pirot and Dimitrovgrad lie at opposite ends of an oval shaped, level valley some eight miles wide and completely enclosed by low mountains with a sparse covering of trees on their stony slopes. Through the centre of this valley, which was now a dismal expanse of mud and water, runs the 'road' and the railway line connecting Europe and Asia. Apart from trains, of which there were a prodigious number, both passenger and goods (though the carriages and wagons were almost always empty), I saw no traffic whatever, a fact which could have been explained by the general wisdom of mankind, or by the flood which had swept away the wooden bridge over the Nisava about five miles from Dimitrovgrad.

At first I was appalled by this catastrophe. It had taken me two hours to cycle the ten miles from Pirot and there was nothing I wanted to do less than return there. Then I saw the concrete and steel railway bridge on my left and waded towards it through a flooded field. First I made sure that there were no trains coming (a precaution easily taken, as Yugoslav trains emit volcanic clouds of smoke and are constantly whistling excited variations on an unidentifiable theme) before climbing with Ron on to the line, and crossing the bridge, to join the road again through a field three feet deep in water. By this time worrying about pneumonia seemed futile; for days I had been living in a state of permanent saturation from the waist down, so that the only sensible reaction was lots of rum and no fuss.

While cycling the two miles from Dimitrovgrad to the Bulgarian frontier my attention was equally divided between the odd things that craters in the road can do to one's lunch and the excitement of approaching for the first time the sinister Iron Curtain. At each bend I looked eagerly for tangles

masses of barbed wire, watch-towers manned by vigilant soldiers armed with machine-guns and binoculars, and alert policemen keenly observing every movement for miles around. But not one of these thrilling phenomena appeared and it was only when I saw a locked, five-foot high gate across the road that I realised I had arrived at the significant point.

Looking around, I saw a neat little bungalow beside the road which, though it didn't actually say so, was obviously the Police-cum-Customs post. I knocked loudly on the open hall-door, got no reply, entered and knocked on each of the doors leading out of the hall, with no more success, and finally opened one of them, yelling and whistling hopefully; stamps on my passport are the only souvenir that I can afford to collect, and I didn't want to be cheated of this one. Still nothing happened, and I stood in the doorway viewing the desk and reflecting that if I wanted to enter the spy business here was my chance to make away with a fine collection of vitally important seals. Finally I left the building, to investigate the possibilities of getting into Bulgaria unaided.

If one looked hard enough, a half-hearted barbed-wire fence was visible stretching away from the road in either direction, marking the frontier. It was so like the kind of ineffectual barrier that some Irish farmers put up to prevent their sheep from straying that I felt quite home-sick. I had no difficulty in dragging Roz through one of the many gaps made by the local peasants and then, returning to the main road, I entered the insignificant little house which is Bulgaria's Northern Frontier Fortress. Again my knock remained unanswered, but this time, when I opened a door leading out of the hall, I found a policeman happily dozing by the stove, with a cat and two kittens on his lap. I immediately diagnosed that he was a *nice* policeman, and when I had gently roused him, and he had recovered from the shock of being required to function officially, I had my diagnosis confirmed.

In December, the Bulgarian Embassy in London had issued me with a visa valid for only four days. Now this genial policeman, who spoke fluent English, took one look at the card, said that it was ridiculous, and issued me with a new visa entitling me to stay in Bulgaria as long as I wished! After which we sat by the stove and amiably discussed our two countries over glasses of brandy.

On leaving the Bulgarian frontier-post, I propped Roz against a tree and returned to Yugoslavia, in another attempt to obtain my souvenir passport-stamp. By now a pathetically bored-looking young man was sitting at the desk, listlessly attempting to solve a crossword puzzle. I explained how it was that my passport had received a Bulgarian entry stamp before it had had a Yugoslav exit one, and he said wearily that he had gone into Dimitrovgrad for a hot lunch. Obviously, at both frontier-posts, the attitude was that not even spies, much less tourists, would operate in the prevailing weather.

I had entered my first orthodox Communist country as a 'neutral' equally suspicious of both pro- and anti-Communist propaganda, but after a week in Bulgaria I left it as an admirer of the limited good that Communism can achieve within less than two decades.

Everywhere I was received with spontaneous friendliness and if any Secret Police had me under surveillance they were very discreet indeed. My movements remained completely unrestricted and I spent two nights as a guest in the households of a factory-worker and a collective farmer, where the standard of living was comparable with that of present-day Irish workers. On my last night I stayed at the home of a regional Party leader and was interested to observe that his standard of living was almost on a par with that of the ordinary workers. Nowhere did I see any evidence of extreme poverty and the average citizen – a cheerful, singularly unoppressed-looking individual – appeared to be adequately clothed, housed and fed.

Admittedly, this spectacular improvement in Bulgaria's standard of living has been gained at the cost of religious and intellectual freedom, though judging by some conversations I had with the

younger generation it will not be long before the phoenix of the individual human spirit rises again from its ashes.

Personally I recoil at once from regimentation and I am far too reactionary to regard 'backward peasants' as being *ipso facto* in need of modernisation; yet in fairness I must give my personal impression of that side of the Communist coin which is not popular among Western propagandists.

I was able to cycle almost all the way from Cuprija to Istanbul, through Bulgaria and Turkey-in-Europe, but the Turkish highlands were still under snow so here again we became dependent on buses and trucks – when such vehicles could operate between blizzards. Mercifully the temperature was not quite as low as it had been in Europe, but the quantity of snow was far in excess of anything I had yet experienced; it was common to see fifty-foot high drifts, shaped so exquisitely by the wind that I still catch my breath at the memory.

En route to Erzurum our bus barely escaped being entombed in snow. We were stuck in a drift on a narrow mountain road and the gallant snowplough which had come to rescue us skidded over a precipice, killing both men on board. Another snowplough then set out from the opposite direction but its progress was understandably slow and meanwhile the blizzard began again. As we waited the snow piled higher and higher around us, its silent softness contrasting eerily with the whine of the gale through the pass.

It is on occasions such as these that I thank God for my sanguine temperament, which refuses to allow me to believe in disaster until it is finally manifest, and I noticed that my comrades in distress were equally well fortified against panic by their fatalistic acceptance of Allah's Will. Yet perhaps we were all more apprehensive than we had allowed ourselves to recognise, for we cheered very loudly when the second snowplough eventually appeared.

An ancient Jewish legend says that the Kurds are descended from four hundred virgins who were deflowered by devils while on their way to King Solomon's court and my own experiences in both Turkish and Persian Azerbaijan prompt me to accept this genealogy as an historic fact.

At Dogubayazit, the last little town en route to the Persian frontier-post, I stayed in the local dosz house, where my bedroom was a tiny box leading off the wide loft which accommodated the majority of the 'Otel's' patrons. This room had a flimsy door, without any fastening, and there was no movable piece of furniture which could have been placed against it as a security measure. The squalid bedding was inhabited by a host of energetic fleas, but their attentions were wasted on me and within minutes of retiring I was sound asleep.

Some hours later I awoke to find myself bereft of bedding and to see a six-foot, scantily-clad Kurd bending over me in the moonlight. My gun was beneath the pillow and one shot fired at the ceiling concluded the matter. I felt afterwards that my suitor had showed up rather badly; a more ardent admirer, of his physique, could probably have disarmed me without much difficulty.

As a result of the loud report and my visitor's rapid retreat there was a stirring of many bodies on the floor outside my room and a few sleepy mutterings – then quiet. Obviously gunshots in the small hours are not regarded locally as signs of an emergency.

By now I had finally escaped from snow and ice and on the following morning came one of the most glorious experiences of the entire journey – a fifteen-mile cycle-run in perfect weather around the base of Mount Ararat. This extraordinary mountain, which inspires the most complex emotions in the least imaginative traveller, affected me so deeply that I have thought of it ever since as a personality encountered, rather than a landscape observed.

Then came the Persian frontier – the most closely guarded we had yet crossed – and now Roz and I were really in our stride, cycling day after day beneath a sky of intense blue, through wild mountains whose solitude and beauty surpassed anything I had been able to imagine during my day-dreams about this journey. Particularly I remember the unique purity of the light, which gave to every variation of every colour an individual vitality and which lucidly emphasised every line, curve and angle. Here, for the first time, I became fully aware of light as something positive, rather than as a taken-for-granted aid to perceiving objects.

Between Tabriz and the Caspian coast the terrain becomes fiercely wild and the few inhabitants do not match it. One midday when I was sitting eating my lunch at the edge of the track, near a hairpin bend overlooking a deep valley, three elderly men came round the bend, carrying spades on their shoulders. As a little farming village lay some two miles back this seemed to me a most natural sight, but then as I was about to salute the group, two of them seized Roz, who was leaning against the cliff a few yards away, and made off down the track with her, while the third advanced towards me, his spade raised threateningly. I fired over his head and quickly backed along the edge of the track, ready to fire again, but the amateur bandits had had enough and bolted like rabbits, mercifully abandoning Roz.

Many experienced travellers have since advised me that it is wiser to go unarmed in such areas where a gun can provoke more trouble than it averts. Obviously, this would be true if one became involved with genuine armed bandits – yet a .25 does have its uses.

However, my next misadventure was such that I judged it best not to produce the pistol. Passing through Adabile at lunchtime on a cold day (we had now risen to a considerable altitude) I paused to treat myself to a hot meal in an eating-house. As usual Roz and I attracted a curious crowd and soon a young police officer, gorgeously uniformed and braided, approached me to say that as this was a Restricted Area, because of Russia's proximity, I must accompany him to the police-barracks to fill in some forms. My inbred trust in police had not yet been undermined so, having finished my lunch, I innocently followed him through a maze of alleyways between mud houses. At last he turned into a little compound with a well in the centre, ushered me through a doorway, locked the door and put the key in his trouser pocket. Only then did I realise that we were alone in an obviously empty private house.

At first my captor was ingratiatingly amiable. But soon, having discovered that European women are not as obliging as he had supposed them to be, he lost all control, and the ensuing scene was too sordid for repetition. As my adversary was armed with a revolver I kept my gun in my pocket and used unprintable tactics to reduce him to a state of temporary agony. During this respite I grabbed his trousers, which by then were lying on the floor, fled to the hallway, found the key, unlocked the door just as my victim appeared behind me, and raced back through the alleyways to the centre of the town.

It is perhaps understandable that, of all the regions I travelled through, Azerbaijan is the only one I would not wish to revisit alone.

Roz and I arrived in Teheran on 20 March, the eve of the Shiah Muslims' New Year of 1342, and the Now Ruz Festival involved me in a delay of five days. Before continuing my journey I had to get a visa for Afghanistan, collect a spare tyre from the Customs and change a travellers' cheque into Afghan currency – none of which transactions would be possible until the conclusion of the Now Ruz celebrations.

The Elusive Visa

TEHERAN

TEHERAN, 26 MARCH

Today a deep depression has moved over Dervla; I presented myself to the Afghan Embassy at 9 a.m. this morning, only to be told that under no circumstances whatever would they grant a visa to a woman who intended cycling alone through Afghanistan. But if this is true, why wasn't I told of this ruling at the Afghan Embassy in London? Apparently about six years ago a lone Swedish woman motorist was carved up into small pieces, since when solitary female travellers have been banned – so they say here. Probably I could easily get a visa in New Delhi, as official decisions rarely conflict with each other in this part of the world: but that's not much consolation at the moment. Of course everyone at the Embassy was very sorry to frustrate me thus and they offered to provide free transport from here to Kabul and looked bewildered when I patiently pointed out that I wanted to cycle because I liked cycling, not because of economic distress. I also pointed out that women get murdered in Europe with monotonous regularity and that the hazards of travelling alone through their country were probably no greater than the hazards of doing likewise in Britain or France. But they refused to be swayed by my eloquence, so this evening it looks as though I'm beaten. However, since leaving the Embassy I've incubated a few nefarious schemes to be tried out tomorrow.

This afternoon, having expensively cut through interminable lengths of red tape, I extricated my tyre from the Customs. Those who know assure me that I'm very lucky to have received a parcel posted from Dublin on only 8 January. Yesterday one of my hosts received a letter sent from Brussels by airmail on 18 November, and letters posted in Teheran to Teheran addresses often spend a week en route.

The temperature has been around 72° F. for the past few days but this evening a cool wind rose suddenly and we've had a heavy, homelike shower.

TEHERAN, 27 MARCH

The Afghans have the most kindly way of trying to thwart one. On arrival at the Embassy this morning, I was received like an old friend and informed that all arrangements had been made for my safe transport to Kabul. Two German motorists – a writer and a painter – were enlisted for the purpose and had very kindly agreed to take on Roz and myself, without even seeing how presentable I was, otherwise either of us might be. The idea was that I'd be entered like a camera or a radio on the passports, so that they'd have to produce me to the police in Kabul and I couldn't get away on Roz once we're over the frontier without *them* being involved in trouble. Being thus reduced to the status of a piece of luggage naturally did no good to my *amour propre*, but with everyone being so pleasantly insistent on my reaching India alive I couldn't decently lose my temper. This lightning move – as it was by local standards – kiboshed one of my nefarious schemes, so having profusely thanked a

concerned, I said that I had an important appointment in half an hour and that I would be back later to fill in and sign the countless relevant documents. Then I sped off by taxi to the Embassy of a 'Friend of Power' where I set about implementing the second nefarious scheme.

Having pleaded my way into the office of a sufficiently senior man, I outlined my miserable predicament and begged for a letter written on his government's behalf requesting the Afghan Government to grant bearer a visa for a month's travelling by cycle through Afghanistan at her own risk. I added that no one need worry about the consequences if I vanished, as none of my relatives are close enough to 'create'. Fortunately, the victim of my machinations was an upholder of Freedom Enterprise and the Liberty of the Individual. He looked at me in silence for a moment, then said 'Well, I suppose if visas had been required in 1492, the New World would not have been discovered. All right – I'll play ball. But remember that all this is very unofficial and unbecoming to my position and I'm depending on you to come out alive at the other end, for my sake – which I somehow think you will do.' Then he proceeded to devise a most impressive document, all red ribbons and massive seals and flourishing signatures, in which concoction he took a fatherly pride. So now I simply *cannot* allow myself to be murdered in Afghanistan!

Half an hour later I was back in the Afghan Embassy, waving the Ruritanian-looking scroll with ill-concealed triumph. Not surprisingly, it worked. No one was happy at the thought of me being granted a visa, but since another state had nobly elected to hold the baby they gloomily agreed – against the better judgement, underlined – to give the lunatic her head. However, Kabul has to be contacted so won't have everything signed, sealed and delivered until the 30th; but I'm too elated tonight to fuss about another few days' delay.

TEHERAN, 28 MARCH

At a party yesterday evening I met three Pakistani officers – a general, a brigadier and a colonel – who are here on a three-months' military mission and who immediately took me under their collective wing. They are all Pathans and are the first people I've met who do *not* expect me to be murdered in Afghanistan. For this, among other reasons, I find their company singularly congenial; being generally regarded as something next door to a corpse becomes tedious after a while. Acting on their cheerful original assumption that I will eventually cross the Khyber Pass in one piece, they have advised me on which parts of Pakistan are most worth seeing and have given me a list of addresses of their friends and relatives all along my route. Colonel Jahan Zeb went to enormous trouble to plan an itinerary for me, which included a detour to the Tribal Territory of Gilgit, so now all is set fair for Pakistan and I'm assured I'll have the Army behind me there – which is quite something in a country now run by the Army!

TEHERAN, 29 MARCH

On leaving Constantinople, where one spends a small fortune on beggars, I had resolved to give nothing to anyone during the rest of the journey lest I end up with a begging-bowl myself. But of course Persia has undermined that resolution: the pathetic wretches seen here simply can't be ignored. (Many of them in the towns and villages are lepers diagnosed too late for treatment – even if treatment were available in their area, which it often isn't – and left to die slowly at home.) So now I've got the problem worked out systematically. I reckon that by being a guest at my friend's house I'm saving £1 a day, which I distribute as baksheesh. This obviously is an oblique form of selfishness; one couldn't come home after a walk through Teheran and settle down to enjoy the luxuries of

Capitalism if one hadn't done something, however trivial, to alleviate the surrounding misery. Yet it well to remember that this misery is not as total or as neglected as it appears to be. One of the religious duties of Muslims – as of Christians – is to give alms to the needy and the vast majority of Muslims of every sect regularly fulfil this duty in proportion to their means. In effect the citizens of these countries provide for their deprived brothers as generously as do the tax-paying citizens of the Welfare State and the disparity between the circumstances of the disabled of Persia and the disabled of Britain is no greater than that between the circumstances of the working men of the two countries; in fact it may well be less, though the distribution of funds is more haphazard. Also the Muslim method of providing 'Social Services' has the important virtue of maintaining a natural and human link between individuals. It is obviously more desirable to have citizens giving to beggars voluntarily out of compassion, rather than to have them grumblingly paying taxes to an impersonal government which dispenses what is left, after its civil servants have been paid, to unknown sufferers who are mere names in a filing cabinet.

Similarly, the bribery which is so rife here, is another, though much less desirable form of indirect taxation; everyone is paid so inadequately that they simply augment their official income as best they can from day to day – a situation accepted by all with much the same brand of resentful resignation as we show towards tax-paying. House-owners pay the local police a regular monthly sum to ensure that their homes and cars will be properly guarded – and if some newcomer refuses to pay on principle his home will be the inevitable target for the next burglary. I've asked several responsible Persians why an orthodox tax isn't imposed and their answer was that you can't do that sort of thing with a mainly illiterate population and that the people who can afford property which needs protection can also afford to subsidise the police. But of course this is only one example and bribery is the determining factor in every sphere of activity from the university professor's correction of exam papers down to the dustman's collection of garbage. I must admit that it's difficult to get adjusted to such a fetid atmosphere, in which one is always conscious of the power of money over integrity.

TEHERAN, 30 MARCH

Today I've been receiving Good Advice in bulk from various Responsible Persons. H.I.M. the Shah was to have gone to Meshed this morning but the papers announced that his trip has been cancelled because of 'bad weather'; as the weather at the moment is perfection (74°F. and cloudless sky) everyone thinks the government a bit dim for not inventing a better excuse. The fact is that the Mullahs are now stirring up serious trouble there about Land Redistribution and Women's Emancipation and as they still have a very strong grip in that area, and are capable of working certain sections of the people into an anti-Shah frenzy, it was judged wiser for H.I.M. to avoid the Holy City just now. (Since I left Tabriz, two women have been killed there in Mullah-provoked anti-Women's Emancipation riots.) As Meshed is the next – and last – Persian city on my route I am being warned repeatedly that I must do my best to look like a man in that area. Also I'm to be very careful about using my camera between here and there as, if I were accidentally to include even a distant mosque in a picture and the crowd happened to be in the mood, I could be stoned and possibly seriously injured as recently happened to two over-keen French photographers.

I've also been advised that hotel bedrooms without locks call for empty bottles balanced on top of the door to ensure that one is not taken altogether by surprise should wandering lechers have designs on one's virtue. (As creating empty bottles is one of the few things I'm good at, this is an appropriate suggestion.) However, I intend staying as often as possible in gendarmerie barracks between here and

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